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NEWS with THE BAY CITY TIMES

Cleanup of PCBs complete

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By Kristina Riggle
TIMES WRITER

Here's great news for lovers of the Saginaw River and Bay: A government project finished up on time and under budget, resulting in a cleaner environment.

About 345,000 cubic yards of contaminated sediment - representing 90 percent of the PCBs in the lower river - are now out of the Saginaw River and stored at a confined disposal facility near the river mouth. The dredging project started April 13, 2000, and finished up July 22, 17 days ahead of schedule.

Luedtke Engineering Co. of Frankfort did the \$9.7 million project with less money than originally budgeted. That will free up between \$1 million and \$2 million for monitoring the dredging results and other environmental projects, said Lisa Williams of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office in Lansing.

The money came from a \$28.2 million lawsuit settlement reached in 1998. The federal government, state government and the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe sued General Motors and the cities of Bay City and Saginaw over PCB contamination in the river and bay. The PCBs got to the river from both industrial contamination and through municipal sewer systems.

General Motors bore the financial brunt of the settlement; Bay City's responsibility will be to operate two boat launches being developed with the

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settlement funds.

Williams said the extra money left over from the dredging project will be used to monitor the effectiveness of the dredging and to complete more restoration projects. One of those projects could be restoring a better connection between the Tobico Marsh and the Saginaw Bay.

The settlement paid for several projects, such as habitat protection and restoration of coastal wetlands.

But the most significant portion of the settlement was the dredging of five polluted "hot spots" in the river. The dredging was done with a special kind of bucket and "silt curtains" to keep PCBs from being stirred up into the river.

The project's completion is good news to environmentalists, even though some of the results might not be felt for years to come.

PCBs are one of the causes of warnings against eating fish caught in the river. The chemicals build up in fish and animals, and are a potential human health hazard as experiments have shown that PCBs disrupt reproductive function and cause cancer. Fish in the river now still have those PCBs in their bodies, but fish might be healthier in the future because of the dredging.

"What we hope is that this is going to speed up the day when the fish consumption advisories for PCBs are gone, but that's still going to take several years," Williams said.

Andy Gorske, manager at Frank's Great Outdoors in Linwood, said he likes to fish the bay and said it's "an excellent idea" to clean the river of PCBs.

He said fishing is an economic boost to the region, helping businesses like his and also hotels and restaurants.

"You put the fish advisory out and that tends to turn people away," he said.

Also, the cleanup is one step toward getting the river and bay removed from the so-called "areas of

concern" list.

The International Joint Commission includes the Saginaw River and Bay as one of 43 "areas of concern" because of 12 factors, such as restrictions on fish or wildlife consumption, beach closings and bird or animal deformities.

"This will be one of the big steps in getting it off of several lists showing it to be amongst the state's dirtiest areas," Williams said.

One group, the Partnership for the Saginaw Bay Watershed, has made it a goal to get the area removed from the Areas of Concern list.

William W. Wright, chairman of the partnership, said 12 different concerns got the area on the list, so there's still a long way to go.

"The key now is to find out how much impact taking these hot spots out has on PCBs we find in fish," he said.

But, Wright said, checking a few of those things off is one step toward getting the area off that list of polluted places.

"It's nice to hear good news, because all too often since the Area of Concern was designated it really is a stigma of the area," said Michael T. Kelly, project coordinator for the Conservation Fund, a nonprofit group which administers the Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative Network.

Terry Miller, president of the Lone Tree Council, called the cleanup "a good signal" the area is moving in the right direction.

But even with the good news, environmentalists are aware there is still much left to do - for instance, more cleanup of the closed landfill on the Middlegrounds.

"I think it's going to take a while. I think it's probably going to take decades before we recognize the difference because we still have historical contamination and we still have other sources that remain to be cleaned up," Miller said.

Even with all the cautionary language about work yet to be done, people who care about the river and bay are pleased.

"Anytime you've got a chance to celebrate you should," said Wright. "This is 345,000 cubic yards of concentrated material that causes cancer and two years ago it was still out there ... now it's not there."

- Kristina Riggle covers Bay City government for the Times. She can be reached at 894-9645.

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